

**Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities
2022 Budget Statement to
City Council Committee on Budget and Government Operations
October 6, 2021
Rachel Arfa, Commissioner**

Good morning, Chairman Dowell and the honorable members of City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to present the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) budget request for fiscal year 2022.

Disability is the only group that anyone can become a member of at any time. Disability is in every one of our 50 wards and in all 77 of our neighborhoods. And, even in this room, disability impacts many of us. Disability is a part of my personal story, as a profoundly deaf person, born and raised in Chicago. As the Commissioner of MOPD, I work every day to ensure that our City is accessible to all our residents. This accessibility includes physical, program, and communication access.

One area of impact is in this space, City Council Chambers. MOPD's Accessibility Compliance Unit (ACU) worked with Commissioner Reynolds and AIS to make our Chambers more accessible in the following ways: adding additional wheelchair accessible and companion seats, ensuring accessible door entrances, removing barriers in the aisle, and adding a high contrast detectable warning strip for people who are blind/low vision and assistive listening devices. Earlier this year, ACU staff assessed accessibility at City College vaccine sites and at United Center to ensure disability access prior to becoming available for individuals to get vaccinated. ACU also maintains a pre-permit review process. This year to date, 165 accessibility plan reviews were conducted and 306 pre-permit plan reviews. Further, we are shifting resources to track accessible housing, which will not only create available data but also increase the ability to connect residents with disabilities with accessible housing.

Launch of Access Officers in Every City Department and Sister Agency

And we are committed to bringing accessibility to all departments and sister agencies. This year, with Mayor Lightfoot's leadership, we launched an Access Officer program, which created a designated point person in every City Department and sister agency, so that members of the public can more easily access City services and have a specific point of contact for any given department's programs or services. MOPD, along with AIS, are working with our Access Officers to assess physical and program access in each department. One example is leveraging our existing virtual platforms to provide accessibility. This summer, MOPD and DCASE worked together to provide audio description (a detailed visual explanation of any action occurring) for the City of Chicago Presents the Blue Angels show, via zoom. On the first day of this event, we had as many as 141 participants log on.

This is just one example of how the pandemic has provided opportunities to be innovative. During the pandemic, MOPD and CDPH worked together to increase disability access to the Covid-19 vaccine, including ongoing community engagement through a disability vaccine working group. In addition, MOPD and CDPH worked to provide 19 disability organizations with 900 Covid-19 vaccine appointments at United Center so that the organizations could register individuals with disabilities. MOPD also advised on physical and communication access at the United Center. Other accessibility implemented included the creation of a Covid-19 testing video available in ASL, and providing clear masks at testing and vaccine sites. MOPD also produced its first social story, on the vaccine process for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which provides a step by step visual of what to expect at the vaccine appointment, a joint effort with advocates.

Employment

As our city is re-opening, there is an acute labor shortage across many industries. It is in this moment that there is an opportunity to truly advance disability employment. This year, we honored the 31st anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and also marked that despite many gains under the ADA, employment continues to be an area where significant progress is yet to be made. This is the time to invest in increasing disability employment, which also includes competitive employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities who have long worked in subminimum wage positions. Mayor Lightfoot's decree to eliminate subminimum wages in the City of Chicago, setting us apart as a nationwide leader, is one such response. We are also responding to requests made over the years for help in finding jobs, and this budget request includes resources so that we can serve Chicagoans with disabilities.

Going forward, MOPD will serve as connectors and navigators to other City resources, providing career placement services and training on navigating the job search as a person with a disability, including strategies on whether and how to disclose a disability and asking for reasonable accommodations. We will also partner with local corporations and provide disability awareness training to businesses and corporations.

In all of our work, MOPD applies an equity lens. We work closely with the Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ) and have devoted internal and external resources to ensure that we are serving all Chicagoans, including Black, Brown, Latinx and Asian, as well as individuals with disabilities, honoring the intersectionality of identities. We have also applied the same equity lens to the provision of accessibility services. For example, MOPD has utilized ASL interpreters who are Black and Brown, who comprise less than two percent of the ASL interpreting field at large. This is an example of our department's commitment to addressing racial equity and systemic racism.

Thank you for your support in helping us to make Chicago the most accessible city in the nation.